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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: WHAT'S NEXT FOR U.S.-SUDAN TALKS?

¶1. Several local newspaper commentators added their voices to the debate surrounding the U.S. role in trying to help the Sudanese political class resolve the country's internal conflicts - Darfur and the North/South dispute over the oil-rich Abyei region. Meanwhile, the local press increasingly turned its attention to the visit of a UN Security Council delegation, which arrived in Khartoum this week to hold discussions with officials about Darfur and the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). There was also considerable reporting and commentary on the appointment of a new AU/UN mediator for the Darfur conflict.

Normalizing relations a "mirage"

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¶2. The pro-government "Sudan Vision" published a column by Alfatih Ziada, entitled "Clarifying the Obvious," in which the author disparaged U.S. Special Envoy Richard Williamson for saying that he did not want to be part of a peace treaty on paper without tangible results on the ground. Addressing himself to the Special Envoy, Ziada said Sudan needs "no American participation in implementation of the CPA, since your goal is to wedge a peg between the CPA signatories. Resolution of Abyei conflict is part of Sudan Constitution, so why shall we negotiate an issue already agreed upon?" Asserting that what the U.S. really wants is "regime change," Ziada added, "We quite understand that the American Christian Right and the Jewish lobby largely influence the American decision-making process." He concluded that the U.S. cannot normalize relations with Sudan until it "fends off pressures by these parties." U.S. foreign policy, Ziada said, "lacks candor, justice, frankness, sincerity of expressions, openness, freedom from prejudice, impartiality and fairness. Normalizing relations with American is [a] mirage."

Why all the concessions?

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¶3. The pro-government and anti-U.S. "Al-Wifaq" took the Government of Sudan (GOS) to task for being too flexible with Williamson. It questioned why Sudan should extend friendly hands to the U.S. knowing that the U.S. would "bite them." The daily was incensed that the GOS sat idly by while Williamson "accused a Sudanese tribe of looting and ruining their hometown." The GOS should have at least refuted the Special Envoy's statement, the editorial said. "Al-Wifaq" recalled that Williamson had previously characterized the GOS as a "fox" and "elusive," so in the newspaper's opinion, the GOS did not deserve to sit and meet with him. The daily further noted that President Omar El-Bashir had announced a week earlier that the talks about normalization would not succeed, yet the GOS entered into a dialogue with the U.S. "Why all these concessions?" the newspaper asked.

¶4. Kamal Bakheit, editor-in-chief of the pro-government "Al-Rai Al-Aam," portrayed the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) as being very capable of producing crisis after crisis, including Abyei. He also accused the U.S. of not being neutral and of insisting that the GOS respond to all of the SPLM's demands. Bakheit called on the SPLM leadership to "think about the future of their country" without taking the U.S. agenda into consideration, and he urged the NCP and SPLM to resolve the Abyei problem as

partners. He asserted that the GOS has "proved its flexibility through declaring its readiness to resume talks whenever the U.S. side decides."

GOS should have implemented CPA

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¶5. Faiez Al-Sheikh Al-Selek, a columnist with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-backed daily "Ajrass Al-Hurriya" ("Freedom Bells"), argued that the GOS should have implemented the CPA instead of pursuing normalization talks with Washington. "Having the political will power to fulfill the requirements of peace, working for self-reconciliation, and strengthening ties of partnership and normalization with the Sudanese people are more useful," the author maintained.

No alternative to dialogue with the U.S.

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¶6. The independent "Al-Watan" published a commentary by Mohamed Hamid Al-Hamari in which he maintained that "there is no alternative to Sudanese-U.S. dialogue and understanding even though the U.S. links relations, understanding, and major common interests in our country to internal positions and controversial issues connected to the influential lobbies in addition to Zionist pressure groups." The author continued, "In spite of the black cloud, we reiterate that we sense that Washington has started seriously to alter the method of its thinking and is looking after its strategic interests, which are represented in a good relationship with Sudan, one of its influential regional pillars."

Sudan's future "gloomy"

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¶7. The editorial in the independent South-oriented daily "Khartoum Monitor" offered a gloomy outlook for Sudan. The "tomorrow that never comes is the ongoing story of Abyei," the editorial began, referring to Shakespeare's "Macbeth." "The chance for a true process of nation building looks remote at this moment simply because the differences are steep." The U.S., the editorial continued, "should in such situations understand the facts as they are on the ground; it should not inherit the British-African dead policies. The British political history in Africa is tragic and painful. The Northern elites condemned it because according to them it prevented them from conquering Southern Sudan. The Southern elites condemned it because it made them subjects to the subsequent governments that inherited their power in the Sudan."

Darfur and the international community

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¶8. The pro-government "Sudan Vision" editorial on June 5, entitled "Can the New Mediator Deliver," was skeptical about the ability of a new AU/UN mediator to make inroads on the Darfur conflict. The editorial credited Salim Ahmed Salim and Jan Eliasson, respectively the AU and UN special envoys to Sudan, for sparing "no effort to pave the way for peace talks that will end the conflict in Darfur." However, their efforts were blocked by rebel intransigence, the editorial asserted. "Unless these parties stand behind the new mediator, he, too, would be unable to carry out his mission."

POWERS